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FM AMEMBASSY NAIROBI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4117
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE
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RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NAIROBI 003876

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/07/2016

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SUBJECT: ETHNIC SOMALIS DISCUSS ETHIOPIA, THE ISLAMIC
COURTS, THE TFG, AND THE U.S.

Classified By: Political Counselor Larry Andre for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (U) This message is part of a series following an early August USAID-sponsored conflict mitigation workshop in Mandera, Northeastern Province, Kenya. This message was cleared with the USAID participant in the discussions.

Summary

¶2. (C) Cross-border conflict mitigation efforts among ethnic Somalis in the Mandera area of Kenya are working. Many ethnic Somalis in the region despise the Transitional Federal Government, feel a mix of enthusiasm and fear concerning the rise of the Union of Islamic Courts, and for the most part, strongly resent the efforts of the Ethiopian government to shape the region. Some predict eventual splits within the Courts along clan lines. End Summary.

Cross-Border Conflict Mitigation Workshop

¶3. (U) From August 7 - 10, a USAID-sponsored conflict mitigation planning workshop took place in Mandera, Kenya at the northeastern tip of Kenya's Northeastern Province, an ethnic Somali region where Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya meet. Among other objectives, the workshop was designed to bring Ethiopian participants into the framework of an existing dialogue between Kenyan and Somali nationals for the purpose of preventing and mitigating conflict. Poloff listened in on many of the discussions, and spoke with local ethnic Somalis, both workshop participants and others.

¶4. (U) USAID has long worked in the region to address sources of conflict. In northeast Kenya, as well as neighboring areas of Ethiopia and Somalia, serious crimes often lead to widespread vendettas in which each member of the victim's clan or subclan seeks vengeance against any available member of the perpetrator's clan or subclan. The ensuing chain reaction of vendetta killings sometimes verges on clan warfare. The cycle of violence can be stopped through early intervention, requiring sustained efforts from government, religious, and tribal leaders.

Mandera Town: Life On the Border

¶5. (U) The population of Mandera town (about 30,000 in the 1999 census) rises sharply in daylight hours, as hundreds

of ethnic Somalis from the two neighboring countries cross the border each morning to work, study, and trade, only to leave by 6 p.m. each night. If they overstay, they risk arrest. Mandera town is hot, dusty, and poor, with only a tiny stretch of paved street. Most people live in clan-based family compounds, where behind cement walls or thorn fences traditional Somali huts are clustered. Donkey carts far outnumber the few cars. Mandera's economy is heavily dependent on the government and NGOs, for both services and income. The town of Bula Hawo lies directly across from the town of Mandera, in the Gedo district of Somalia. Smuggling is an important source of income for many in Bula Hawo (septel).

Frank Discussions with Working-Level Administrators

16. (C) A USAID/State team met with local NGO officials from both the Somali and the Kenyan sides of the border who have extensive peace-building and conflict resolution experience. Participants, besides the USAID/State team, included Ahmed Ismail ("Zebe"), coordinator for the Gedo-based NGO Consortium of Somalia (and a former District Commissioner of Bula Hawo); Ismail Mohamed, also working for the NGO Consortium; Abdiya Hassan, a Kenyan Somali woman who works for the Mandera Development and Peace Committee (MDPC), and Gedo Ma'alim, an official of the Arid Lands Resource Management Project (ALRMP). In the absence of official Ethiopian participation, our NGO interlocutors felt free to share their concerns about Ethiopian involvement in Somalia. Given our interlocutors' status as working-level administrators, they are well placed to communicate common sentiments among the residents of Somalia's Gedo district and

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the neighboring areas of Kenya's North Eastern Province.

Conflict Resolution Efforts Produce Results

17. (C) "Zebe" (strictly protect) opened discussions by describing the impact to date of the conflict resolution programs on relations between Mandera and Gedo Provinces. Before, he said, Kenyan government personnel had no official meetings with Somali nationals. If a small incident took place in Mandera between Kenyans and Somalis, Kenyan officials immediately closed the border, imposing hardships on both sides of the line. "There was no process to resolve conflict," he said, but now, "everything is resolved peacefully." Conflict can always come, but "we have the capacity to solve it. The only gap is with Ethiopia." Zebe offered an illustration: five days earlier, the Kenyan District Commissioner had called him to tell him of the kidnapping of a Kenyan citizen from Kenya to Somalia (probably for defaulting on a debt). As NGO Coordinator in Bula Hawo, he began working with his contacts on the Somali side to find the man (he was still working on the problem).

But Ethiopia Needs To Be Brought In

18. (C) Gedo Ma'alim from the (Kenyan) ALRMP contrasted the Kenya/Somalia mutual search for solutions with the Kenya/Ethiopia relationship. Recently in Ethiopia a Kenyan was killed, but there is no way for local officials to work directly together to solve the crime and mitigate conflict arising from the killing.

Gedo,s View of the TFG: Warlords, Puppets, Losers

¶9. (C) After 15 years in which clan leaders exercised power, Somalis gave the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) a chance to try to solve Somalia's problems, but "now we see their quality," Zebe said. The perception is that "the TFG is the warlords, so no one supports them." The further perception that Ethiopia "owns" the TFG has "united the Somali nation against Ethiopia," and by extension against the TFG. Within the Transitional Federal Institutions (TFIs), Zebe reserved his harshest criticism for Gedo,s MPs in the parliament. "They all support Ethiopia," he said, and "they are so illiterate they don't even know how to pray." "People say only the Ethiopians are supporting the TFG," according to Zebe,s colleague Ismail Hassan. If war came between the TFG in Baidoa and the Courts in Mogadishu, he went on, people believe the TFG would be "kicked out."

Gedo,s View of the UIC: "Bravo, But..."

¶10. (C) In sharp contrast, Zebe noted that the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) has won "bravos" from all Somalis for defeating the warlords, ending the roadblocks in Mogadishu, and opening the airport (NOTE: And now the port also. END NOTE). Nonetheless, the people of Gedo region are not eager for the Courts to eliminate all opponents and rule alone, Zebe cautioned, because of their own experience. "People in Gedo know the people involved," Zebe said. Hassan Dahir Aweys, the head of the Supreme Islamic Council within the UIC, led the forces of Al Ittihad Al Islami (AIAI) in 1997 against the Somali National Front (SNF), which was backed by the Ethiopian government. The war between the two "killed 500 men" and destroyed vital infrastructure over the two-year conflict, until the SNF was defeated and took refuge in Ethiopia. "The people of Gedo don't welcome the drumbeats coming out of Mogadishu," Zebe concluded. "We know what's happening in both Baidoa and Mogadishu, and we don't want to jump from the frying pan into the fire."

Ethiopia Hated--Except When It Makes Food Flow

¶11. (C) Kenyan citizen Abdiya Hassan pointed out that in July, the militias were blocking CARE aid convoys into Gedo. When the Ethiopian military came in, the local

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militias fled from their roadblocks. The people of Gedo were so pleased that "they gave (the Ethiopian soldiers) mattresses." How could the people of Gedo, who thought of Ethiopia as "the croc in the river" in 2004, give them mattresses in July, another Kenyan Somali asked. "Because of our need," was Zebe's response.

Anti-U.S. Feeling Not Enough for Courts, Unity

¶12. (C) Zebe said people in Gedo are skeptical of the Courts because while "Islam is one," each subclan has its own court. The Courts in Mogadishu "have no vision for the rest of the country." There is a "spiritual force" in Somalia behind the UIC, but that is because "people have heard the Americans are behind the warlords. It's a question of uniting against the Americans." Eventually, however, the Courts will split along sub-clan fault lines, due to the rivalry between the Haber Gedir and the Abgal especially. He said the people of Gedo,s predominant clan, the Marehan, do not like the TFG, but have their doubts about the Courts too.

Comment

¶13. (C) Many of the people of Gedo appear to feel caught between a rock and a hard place; an Ethiopian government they characterize as willing to buy leaders and bully the people into submission, and an Islamist movement that seems eager for a war they do not want. The exploits of the Islamic Courts -- opening the roadblocks, defeating the warlords, and reopening the airport and port -- combined with their blend of Somali nationalism and Islam, have caught the imagination of many ethnic Somalis in the region, even while others are worried about what the courts will do with their new power.

RANNEBERGER